

Sermon for the Nativity of Saint John the Baptist, Sunday, 24.vi.2007
Ev. Luth. Church of Saint James the Apostle / Brogue, Pennsylvania
9:00 a.m., Morning Suffrages (LBW Responsive Prayer I)
Malachi 3:1-4, [Psalm 141], Acts 13:13-26, Luke 1:57-80

J. J. !

Grace to you and peace from Him Who is and Who
was and Who is to come! ✠Amen.



Let us hear again the last three verses of the priest
Zechariah's hymn of praise and prophecy on the birth
of his son, John:

*"You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High,
for you will go on before the LORD to prepare His way,
to give His people knowledge of salvation by the forgiveness of
their sins,
In the tender compassion of our God,
the dawn from on high shall break upon us,
to shine on those who dwell in darkness and the shadow of
death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace."*

--Luke 1:76-79

Those verses I just read, and the entire Canticle of Zechariah from the first chapter of the Gospel according to Saint Luke, will be very familiar to any Lutheran used to praying the office of *Matins* or 'Morning Prayer' as we have it in *LBW* on pages 134 and 135 and as we will find it in *ELW* on page 303.¹ In this way the day is begun by joining Zechariah in his joy, wonderment and hope, looking toward what riches the LORD has in store for us as the day consecrated to Christ unfolds.

Great promises had been made by the Archangel to Elizabeth concerning her child, God's answer to her prayer, as to other holy women of Israel

¹ The wording is identical between *LBW* and *ELW*, except that *ELW* has found a way to avoid saying 'He' with reference to God and except that *LBW* ends this and every Canticle in the Divine Office with the *Gloria Patri* ("Glory be to the Father . . ."), as the Church has done for over 1,500 years, whereas *ELW* simply cuts the *Gloria Patri* out at this point, presumably to save space—may the Triune God forgive us and deliver us from our new teachers, the copy editors and printers! The appointed Psalmody for this feast, Psalm 141, is a Canticle for the Office of Vespers (Evening Prayer) and may be found at *LBW* p. 145f and at *ELW* p. 312f, where the *Gloria Patri* is included. Thus, the Canticles for two hours of the Divine Office are derived from the propers for this feast.

before her whose hope for a child was fulfilled in spite of their age and presumed barrenness. The promise was that Elizabeth's child,

Zechariah's son, would himself

be an 'angel,' an *evangel*,

a messenger of God. That

is why John the Baptizer is



sometimes depicted with the swift wings of an angel in Christian art.

All parents hope to live long enough to see their children's life begin to unfold, but not so long as to see it end. One wonders how long Zechariah and Elizabeth lived. Old enough to be John's grandparents, what did they live to see in their son, John, like his cousin, Jesus, descended from kings and

priests of Israel? Did they have to cope with his puzzling flight into the Syrian Desert or the wilderness of Sinai or the Dead Sea? Did they have to hear the news of his execution by King Herod and to lay his broken body to rest after it had been borne on the shoulders of his disciples out of Jerusalem into the hill country of Judæa?

Did they have any knowledge or sense of the immense movement John would lead, a movement to re-consecrate the land and its people to the LORD and His coming Anointed, the Messiah Whom John seemed to indicate was more than Messiah only, that He would be the 'Lamb of God,' God's own perfect sacrifice to atone for the sins of the whole world? Today, two political and religious movements

representing a few segments of Palestine struggle for dominance, but Fatah and Hammas are puny compared with the following of John, to whom the *whole* people from all strata of society, even the occupying soldiers, came out to be washed clean from their sins in the Jordan and to receive John's hope and John's faith in the One Who was coming.

That One is He with
Whom we associate John most
closely in our understanding and in
our mind's eye. As far as the Holy
Evangelists tell us, John and Jesus



never met before their paths crossed where John was proclaiming the coming Kingdom of God, at the Jordan where John was washing the whole people before God

and in the hope of the One Who was to come. There, at the Jordan, John presents His cousin and Lord with an army of repentance, with a nation of hope in the promises of God. And there, at that point, John's mission and his whole reason for being is fulfilled.

Why does the Church still mark the feast of John's birth? John does what the Church is called to accomplish, but *for the whole world* until the end of time: to point to God's great love and that alone, to invite men and women of every language and station, of every land and color under heaven to be united with Christ in Holy Baptism and in a holy life made possible through His sacrifice as the Lamb of God Whom John proclaimed, for Whom alone John lived.



Glory be to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning is now and will be forever, and to Him Who loves us and has freed us from our sins by His blood, and has made of us a kingdom, priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion with the Father and the Holy Spirit both now and forever. ✠ Amen.



S. D. G.!